Beautiful Attitudes

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Bill Glass played professional football for 11 seasons for the Detroit Lions and Cleveland Browns. After his retirement, he directed a prison ministry called Champions for Life. Bill discovered early that an inordinate number of boys in prison have little or no relationship with their fathers. This lesson was brought home to him in a visit to a Texas prison for boys aged 10-15. He asked the warden how many of the 300 boys had received a visit from their father in the past year. “One,” said the warden, “and he only stayed 15 minutes. He got into an argument with his son and stomped away mad.”

Most adolescents incarcerated in American jails today are there for gang-related crimes. Boys, who are most susceptible to gang activity, don’t form strong ties with their families and most especially their dads. This glaring realization led Bill Glass to write a book on the subject, *The Healing Power of a Father’s Blessing*.

There is power in blessing. Last fall, we devoted 11 Sundays to telling Jacob’s story. There is a huge tug-of-war between Isaac’s twin sons, Jacob and Esau, over their father’s blessing. Jacob tricks his father into giving him the blessing reserved for the eldest son in the family. When Esau recognizes his brother’s deception, he cries out, “Haven’t you reserved any blessing for me? Bless me—me too, my father!” (Genesis 27:34, 36).

There’s so much power in blessing. Each new generation craves the blessing of the previous one. I know people well into their adulthood who are still seeking their parent’s blessing.

If there is this much power in blessing, why don’t parents bless their children more often? I suspect parents think that what their children need most are things like guidance and correction. Don’t minimize the power of blessing.

What did Jesus do when people brought children to him? He took them in his arms and blessed them (Luke 6:46-48).

What’s the first thing God does in Genesis after He creates people (1:27)? God blesses them (1:28). Blessing originates in the heart of God.

Genesis begins with blessing. We call it grace; God’s favor on undeserving people. Before we are ever given the command to love and serve...
God, we are blessed by God. God’s blessing isn’t dependent on performance.

We don’t bless children because they perform to our expectations. We bless them because we love them. This blessing need not be formal or complicated. A simple “I love you” will suffice. Even if your children roll their eyes, bless them anyway.

Jesus chooses 12 disciples, called Apostles, to join his band of followers (6:12-16). He then positions himself on a level plain to preach a sermon (7:20). That’s why it’s called the Sermon on the Plain. Dah! Jesus begins his sermon with a series of four blessings called beatitudes. Luke supplies the abridged version. The full accounting of all nine beatitudes is pronounced by Jesus, in Matthew’s gospel, in his famous Sermon on the Mount.

The word “beatitude” is a compound of two Latin words for “beauty” and “attitude.” These four beatitudes are quite literally beautiful attitudes.

Let me caution you about these beatitudes. Jesus is not intending to pronounce a general benediction on people’s misfortune. Poverty, hunger, grief and resentment are not in themselves guarantees of future reward. Jesus has something else in mind with these four beatitudes.

Jesus’ first beatitude reads, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). Jesus is not blessing poverty, per se. He’s not elevating poverty to be more virtuous than wealth. Jesus’ beatitude in Matthew’s gospel proves instructive, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Those who are poor in spirit know their need of God. “Blessed are those who know their need of God.”

Later in his sermon, Jesus warns those who seek after wealth: “Woe to those who are rich, for you have already received your reward” (6:24). When we have lots of money, we feel empowered and self-reliant. We don’t need other people nearly as much. Why, we don’t even need God. Material wealth and comfort often anesthetize us to the gospel. John Wesley called prosperity “a sweet poison.”

Jesus’ second beatitude follows naturally from the first: “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied” (6:21). This beatitude in Matthew’s gospel is translated, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled” (5:6).

I would paraphrase this beatitude: Blessed are those who have big appetites for God. People who are hungry for God will be satisfied. Those who gorge themselves with a steady diet of the world’s fare will one day go hungry.

Jesus’ third beatitude, “Blessed are you who weep now (or alternatively “Blessed are those who mourn” Matthew 5:8), for you will laugh” (6:21)
Blessed are those who mourn….

Blessed are those who forego popularity to do what is right in the kingdom of God.

seems initially to be incomprehensible. Who would dare offer this beatitude as comfort to those awash in grief? But context is everything here. Given that Jesus’ previous beatitudes are primarily centered on spiritual poverty and hunger, it follows that this beatitude also has something to do with the spiritual realm. Blessed are those who mourn their sin is the way I would paraphrase this third beatitude. We talk in this church about God’s Big Story of Creation, Fall and Redemption. We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. We mourn what sin does to our relationship with God.

Jesus’ fourth beatitude reads as follows: “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man” (6:22). These four verbs pile up in quick succession to underscore the point that Jesus’ followers will experience persecution. Remember, these beatitudes are addressed primarily to Jesus’ 12 disciples. While a larger crowd listens in, the primary audience is his disciples. They are people willing to forego everything to follow Jesus. There are people living in areas of the world today who are persecuted for following Jesus.

The cumulative effect of these four beatitudes is meant to create a lasting impression on Jesus’ disciples. Jesus is suggesting that things aren’t always what they seem. The four beatitudes in Luke’s gospel are followed by a series of four woes. What do you notice about these four pairs of blessings and woes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLESSING</th>
<th>WOE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor (v20)</td>
<td>Rich (v24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungry (v21)</td>
<td>Full (v24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weep (v21)</td>
<td>Laugh (v25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hated (v22)</td>
<td>Praised (v26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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These two lists are set in obvious opposition to each other. Jesus talks about a great reversal coming. Those who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated will one day be rich, full, laughing and praised. The corollary is also true: those rich and prosperous ones will one day become poor and needy. Those who are last will one day be first and those who are first will go to the end of the line. Those who hoard life will have it taken away just as those who give their lives away will have it restored to them.


We know at one level that money and possessions can’t make us happy, yet I suspect we don’t quite believe it. We jockey to receive the next promotion. We covet the brass
happiness.
...is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy cause.”

We still have in our minds that a new car or money or a move to a warmer climate will make us happy. We keep thinking, if only I can date this person or buy that dream house, I’ll be happy.

We go to incredible lengths to achieve these things. Jesus wants to save us the heartache. One day this stuff will blow away like chaff. Things can’t satisfy us. Those of us who preoccupy our lives with wealth and fine dining, who have become smug and self-reliant will be in for a big surprise. Such people will become, in the end, poor, hungry and destitute ones.

The world says the one who dies with the most toys win. Jesus says those who die full of God are, in fact, the winners. Money, popularity and fame cannot possibly satisfy people. True satisfaction comes only from those things that fill our souls.

We live in a culture virtually obsessed with happiness. Parents routinely tell me, “I just want my kids to be happy.” I appreciate the sentiment, but there are more important things in life than happiness.

Helen Keller had this to say about happiness: “Many people have the wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy cause.”

You might think these beatitudes are reserved for some faraway kingdom in a never-never land. Actually, these beatitudes are spoken by Jesus in the present tense. Four times in a span of five verses the little adverb “now” is used. “Blessed are you who hunger for God now.” “Blessed are you who weep now.”

Do you want true happiness? Blessed are those who know their need of God. Blessed are those with big appetites for God. Blessed are those who mourn what sin does to their relationship to God. Blessed are those who forego popularity to do what is right in the kingdom of God. Blessed are such people!